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SPACE OF YEARS

By MARION CROSBY

Mrs. Heath was seventy, her husband was eighty, and her mother was ninety; and they all lived together at the end of a grassy lane, which branched off from the road that led to the prairie. Their tall white house stood in the middle of a broad green yard. A white picket fence marked the front of this yard; an orchard, berry bushes, and the abundant rows of a vegetable garden lay at the rear; along the two sides stretched fragrant shrubbery and beds of beautiful flowers. All the trees and plants and flowers were far back from the house. That stood alone, without porch or shutter or vine, as stark and square as a shoe-box on end. It was an old house, but like its old owners it looked enduring.

Steve, my little lame brother, and I longed to see the inside of that house — we had heard such stories of it — but even Mother was never asked to cross the threshold. The Heaths, though very kind people, were oddly inhospitable.

Each summer in jelly season we would drive out to their little farm for currants, and then later for hyslop crabs for preserves, and again in the autumn for the big yellow cucumbers that make such good sweet pickles. Then we tried our very best to get a peek inside when Mrs. Heath should come out; but we always went to the wrong door. We tried "counting out", standing behind the lilac next the white picket fence, before we went in to knock.

"Eeny-meeny, miney-moe; cracky-feeny, finey-foe;
Oppa-ducha; poppa-ducha; rake, bake, pan-cake,
dough!

Come-out-for-Marjorie-and-Steve!"

we would say, pointing to the front door, back door, back and forth. That *should* have worked; but as surely as we went to the front, out would come Mrs. Heath from the back of the house. And if we went to the back there she would be, out from the front door and standing by the surrey talking to Mother while we still waited on the back door-step for her to turn the shiny knob and give us a glimpse of the kitchen.

"You silly children," Mother would say.

Once Mrs. Heath was uncertain whether she could let us have the currants or not. "I ought to make them up into jell, myself," she objected. "But, still, with all my sewing to do, and looking after the garden and the chickens and the housework, I don't hardly get the time — and Mother she's sort of got to save herself some —" On and on she went with her story of work until even Jerry, the horse, turned his head to gaze at her solemnly out of a glistening eye.

She was "old Mrs. Heath"; but for some reason she did not appear old. To be sure, her dress of cherry colored print was made in antiquated style. Full gathered skirt, fitted basque with long flowing sleeves and a row of bullet buttons close-set down the front — it might have been copied in each detail from the costume of a steel-engraving lady in some book of olden date. But in spite of her clothes she looked curiously young. Her face — it wasn't so much that she had color in her eyes and skin and hair, blue and pink and brown, as that she had *strength* in them. And, I remember, even in that battered shade-hat that she wore that day she had an air of grace and fashion — though fashion of another day. I wondered if Jerry noticed it. He stared at her steadily for a long time; and Joe, our Irish setter, who always followed on our drives, stood in the road panting and

wagging his feathery tail with interest while he too watched her quaint figure.

Suddenly Mrs. Heath turned toward the barn and called, "Silas, bring those currants in that basket there," and her voice that had been rather flat and empty before rose clear and sweet as a singer's. We started as we had once at a ventriloquist's entertainment. She was surprising enough with her grace and vigor; but now, it seemed, she could at will call out in the very tones of youth.

Mr. Heath came out from the barn, bearing before him a round bushel basket which showed ribs of red through its gaps. He was tall and spare and a trifle bent. At every step he bumped his thin knees against the bulging staves; and his gray tuft of beard which curved out from his gaunt chin nodded at every bump. He never said a word, even when he lifted the basket to the floor of the surrey and covered it carefully with the linen lap-robe. When he had finished tucking in the fringe he walked silently back to the barn.

"He leaves the talking to me," remarked Mrs. Heath. Her laugh had rich tones where you least expected them.

On the way home we puzzled over the closed house. Steve had a theory. "There is something in there they don't want us to see — something strange and curious. That's what I think. Don't you think so, Marjorie?" He looked at me with his intense gray eyes that commanded me to agree with him on the instant.

"Probably it's just like any other house inside," I objected. "It's because you have a collection that you are always thinking about things strange and curious."

"There are things in there I'd like to see." Steve ignored my objection. "Perhaps she will let us in some other time," he concluded hopefully.

We got Nellie Kimball, when she came to our house to sew in the fall, to tell us over again about the Heaths and the inside of the house. She was Mrs. Heath's niece, so

we trusted her story as far as it went. The difficulty was that she had never been all over the house, she admitted that herself. The Heaths were inhospitable, even to their relatives.

First there was the story of the colt, who, being only twenty-nine, was so much younger than the rest of the family that he was really quite a pet. If the colt did not wish to go to town he never was made to. The Heaths would harness him up to the high buggy and drive him to the end of the lane. "Whoa," they would say, and stop to let him consider how he felt about going farther. Perhaps he would start off at a sprightly gait, and perhaps he would stand still as — well, nothing else is as still as a horse that won't go. Mr. Heath would flap the reins across his back a few times in gentle remonstrance, and Mrs. Heath would say, "Get ap, Colt; get ap," but that was all the urging they ever gave the colt. Convinced that he preferred not to go they would drive him back to the barn and walk to town. Once the colt had been willing to go, but not in the right direction. At the end of the lane he turned west instead of east and carried all three of the old people away out over the prairie through Sandy Hollow and almost to Star Rock; and he never brought them back until supper time.

"They talk of it to this day," said Nellie Kimball. "They thought it was so smart of the colt."

I wondered if Jerry knew how kind Mrs. Heath was to the colt. Perhaps that was the reason he studied her so curiously the day we bought the currants. Jerry had nothing to complain of, I am sure, pampered as he was; but, I suppose, even a horse has his ideals.

"Yes, it's true about her dresses," Nellie went on in answer to a question from Mother. "Once, years and years ago, Aunt Jennie found a pattern that she liked, and while she was cutting out her new dress she thought she might as well cut enough to last — so she told Uncle Silas to buy her some cloth. Such a lot as he did get — man-like! I should think there was as many as twenty

dress patterns layin' there on the piano ready to make up whenever she wants a new dress. It's one of those old-fashioned square pianos with lots of room on top to hold things, and there are all her dresses for the rest of her life layin' there — plaids and stripes and plain, and all the colors that Uncle Silas likes. Aunt Jennie thought it was right smart of Uncle Silas to take such an interest. She won't put them away for fear of moths, and she dusts them and brushes regular till the cut edges are getting sort of frayed. But then, Aunt Jennie is so slender, and the pattern was large, so they fit all right if she does trim off the seams a little. And they do make bright colors in the room, specially the plaids."

"There are things in that house I'd like to see," said Steve when Nellie went off to stitch on the sewing machine.

One winter soon after this Stevie was ill for months and months as he had been so often before. The doctor said to be patient; but who can be patient with Spring coming at last, and a little boy not able to get about with his crutch even? I think Father and Mother were too sad even to know that it was Spring. Steve's great pleasure was in his collection. He pored over his stamp album for hours at a time; and then, tiring of so many nations, he would have out his Indian curios. Knives and arrowheads, and bright beaded belts and scabbards, and moccasins of smoke-smelling buckskin lay scattered over his white bed while he would give each a numbered label and classify it as Ojibway or Sioux. A heavy stone war-club always left a dent in the counterpane even after he had let us take the trophies back to their proper shelves in the butternut book-case to be placed in order just as he directed.

Father came in one day looking quite jubilant. "I met old Mrs. Heath down town this morning, and she asked about Steve. I told her how interested he was in his col-

lection until he could get out doors again. She said she was coming to see him."

"I'd rather get in to see her," remarked Steve. "There are things in that house that I should like to see."

But a few days later when we looked out and saw the colt consent to being tied to our hitching post Steve's eyes brightened, and he could hardly wait while Mrs. Heath climbed the front steps.

"Steve's got a collection," I blurted out at her as I opened the front door before she had a chance to ring the bell. Standing there on the threshold, in her voluminous dress of magenta and green and the variegated paisley shawl that fell in long pointed folds from her thin shoulders, she was a specimen to delight the heart of any collector. As she entered the parlor she unwound a thick brown veil from her forehead and ears, uncovering a tiny black velvet bonnet which let her small head look so very small above her wide clothes that, really, all I could think of was the knob on the cover of our tall sugar bowl. She pulled off her black cashmere gloves and warmed her hands over the register just as a doctor does before going in to see a patient. "I have something for the boy," she announced.

All the way upstairs I was thinking, "Mrs. Heath is seventy, and her husband is eighty, and her mother is ninety, and I wonder what old thing this is that she has brought all done up in that yellowed newspaper."

Stevie's eyes were shining with expectancy as he drew himself up in bed, and his white face had that ready-to-behold expression that always came when there was a box to be unpacked. I think we were all prepared for some gorgeous treasure, and had just a moment's disappointment when we saw revealed a quantity of worn and discolored little books with paper covers.

"Almanacs!" exclaimed Mother. "I might have known."

Mrs. Heath was reciting their dates to Steve who reached for them with his eager hand. Seventeen hun-

dred and such a number — up to eighteen hundred and forty. I believe Stevie could see back to seventeen hundred and whatever the number was and on through each year to the last one — there was such a divining look in his great gray eyes — and see also the ancient, fragrant kitchens back East where they had hung, and the people of other days who had read them. Collectors are like that.

"Seventeen hundred!" said Steve below his breath. I think he felt as though he had shaken hands with George Washington.

He stacked the dog-eared relics in a brown circle around him. There against the white background of his bed you could imagine that they formed the dial of a great clock which was marked off in years instead of in hours; and the figures of the hale old lady and the frail little boy bending across the bed were like hands of the time-piece, they were so intent upon examining the years without skipping a single one. They rehearsed the history of that long period very seriously. When they came to Andrew Jackson Mrs. Heath took the almanac of that year and read it right through, jokes and all. Sometimes, over the jokes, her dry and elderly reading voice broke into rich, musical laughter that quite drowned out the thin, tired sound of Stevie's mirth.

At last she untied the colt and started back to the tall white house at the end of the green lane. Steve was as weary as if he had lived those years from seventeen hundred and such a number to eighteen hundred and forty, but he wished the almanacs left within hand's reach.

We speculated a good deal that day upon old Mrs. Heath and her closed house. Why was she so old in some ways and so young in others?

"Maybe she is not old at all — maybe she is simply masquerading in those clothes. I think so when I see her eyes dance and hear her laugh."

"No, she is old, Marjorie — very old." Steve an-

swered me with the authority of a connoisseur. He was the student of antiquity.

At other times kind old Mrs. Heath brought Steve curious objects from strange countries — shells and dried sea plants and coral branches, little lacquered boxes, a bone from the catacombs, and once, on his birthday, an iridescent tear bottle which she said came from the tomb of a Phoenician king. She never told where she got them, and after our first questions Mother would no more let us ask again than she would conspire with us to discover the inside of the tall white house at the end of the green lane. She was such a lady!

“Probably she had an uncle who was a sea captain and sailed around the world. It may have been he who brought back all these curious objects,” Mother suggested one day. She struggled for the happy voice that she kept for Steve; but it was hard to speak gaily when he lay there in his bed, paler and thinner than he had ever been before.

Steve looked up quickly from his Indian collection, which he was examining, and shook his head. “No, it was not an uncle,” he said with a quiet air of authority. Then he returned his attention to the collection before him. He studied piece after piece, wrote new labels, and entered a list in a small red note-book that he kept in the pocket of his blue dressing-gown. At last, idly, he began to arrange the brightly beaded buckskin things in a gorgeous procession across his white counterpane. First came the old Ojibway moccasins that were embroidered clear down to the toe in a rare design of blue and white flowers with green leaves and tendrils, all picked out in yellow; then a row of scabbards, heavy from tip to top with queerly variegated bead flowers, red, green and violet; a Sioux war-belt, stiff with a wreath of pointed roses; a fringed satchel that looked like a square bouquet. The lesser curios brought up the rear.

“See, a flotilla of flower-decked barges upon a white

ocean," he announced merrily, and then he sank back upon his pillows, wan and spent from his exertion. Pain-wrinkles quivered about the corners of his delicate mouth and half closed his eager gray eyes. Only his tumbled yellow hair, which Mother was smoothing, looked boyish, and his little hand, which she held.

"No, it wasn't an uncle," I said when we fell to talking again. "It was a lover, I say — someone she knew before she married Silas, in those days when she had a beautiful voice."

"No, it wasn't a lover either," Steve answered. He had sunk back into a sort of crevasse between the billowy ends of his pillows and lay there, his face in a shadow that was deepened by the fading of the light in the room. We could scarcely see him, but his voice come out of that dimness clear and sure as an oracle. "I have been studying it over," he said. "She has been to all those places herself. She is very old. I am not sure that she isn't much more than seventy years old. She can remember far back. Perhaps she is a hundred and seventy — perhaps she is as old as the prairie — perhaps she will live forever. . . . And she has lots and lots more curios in her house. There is one in there! It is like a charm. It keeps everyone well who lives in the house with it, and its owner it never lets die. . . . I think it lies on a shelf in a closet about in the middle of the house. I could find it if she would only let me in."

With a little sigh he slid down from his pillows and stretched his tired limbs out straight under the coverlet. The Indian collection, dislodged by his moving, fell out of its perfect order. The heavy stone war-club rolled to his feet; but the flat beaded and flowered things clung to the low mound that his body made beneath the white spread. In that half light they looked like flowers strewn over a snow-covered grave.

Mother gave a cry and swept them away to their place in the butter-nut book-case. She came back sobbing and took Stevie in her arms.

That was all years ago when Mrs. Heath was seventy and her husband was eighty and her mother was ninety. Now Mrs. Heath is ninety herself. She still lives in the tall white house at the end of the green lane, but now she lives alone.

One balmy afternoon of last October I was hurrying along River Street with little thought in my mind of the past or of anything except the urgency of the day's affairs until, at the entrance to a little park near the waterfront, I was suddenly brought to a standstill by the startling beauty of the autumn scene. On the bluffs, across the river, trees had turned to the color of oranges, peaches, plums, red geraniums. Even the duller foliage, in the strong sunlight, gleamed like brass and copper and bronze. Cut edges of the sandstone on the face of the bluff shone like inset patches of gold. The sky and the river curving below were jewel blue, the distant haze an amethyst band. Even the street, there on my other hand, had a burnished aspect today, as if, not to be outdone by the bluffs and the river, it had called upon the sun to enhance every shade of brick and painted wood, and the brightness of every window display. The red brick bank building on the corner, especially, looked like a pavilion at a fair with its open windows crowded with sheaves of grain and corn and high mounds of red apples. On the opposite corner a movie theatre advertised itself with a flaunting picture of the reigning star, as red and yellow and blue as the trees and sky.

Then as I looked my eye caught another bit of autumn. From beyond the movie lady, as brilliant in her array as she, came old Mrs. Heath, moving serenely and confidently up the street, apparently unchanged since many years. There were the same tiny bonnet, the same green silk shawl, and if not the same red and russet and blue plaid dress of my childhood, at least one of those that lay upon the square piano cut by the same wide-skirted pattern. Above all, there was about her the same inexplicable air of grace and fashion that had characterized her twenty

years ago. She paused close to the gaudy bill-board, head held high, and I could imagine her quite willing to challenge comparison upon more counts than one with the young beauty depicted there.

She stepped out into the street, unheeding the traffic in sublime manner. In the middle of the crossing I saw her raise her hand and majestically halt a trio of motor cars that bore down upon her. They stopped, swerving with astonished snorts, and gave her passage while she proceeded leisurely to the opposite curb. There on the bank steps, so unfaltering and assured, she seemed an actual projection of the time of her youth into our time, and not at all like an elderly person who had lived on. I wondered if the loiterer over yonder had the same idea — he started so when he stepped aside to let her pass.

"Did you see her just then — Aunt Jennie and the automobiles?" It was Nellie Kimball upon a park bench near by. She drew a long sigh of relief. "It is a wonder she wasn't killed right there before our faces and eyes," she went on. "She will come down town when she has business to attend to, and if she allows me to come with her at all she insists that I stay way off here on the edge while she does her errands. She says she doesn't need any help. It doesn't seem right —"

"I should not worry about her. She won't be hurt." I remembered that Nellie Kimball never had appreciated her aunt.

"But she's ninety years old. . . . It doesn't seem right," she protested.

"Does she live all alone?"

"Yes. She will have no one with her. She just won't hear to having any of us in the house — except once in a while, downstairs. It doesn't seem right."

"I wish she would let me come to see her."

"Well, you can go, but —"

And that was what happened.

Soon afterwards I was driving home alone from the

prairie. For miles an incessant west wind had been whipping my ears in sharp bounding rhythms. Just the fatiguing monotony of that blow, blow, blow that seemed to pitch itself upon me from the far border of the continent drove me into the tree-sheltered haven of Mrs. Heath's lane, and I stopped my car before her white gate. I knocked at the front door. I knocked a second time and a third. No one answered. I went around to the back door and, standing on the step where Steve and I had watched for the shiny brown door-knob to be turned by a hand from within, I knocked again. The knob did not move. Still there was a *feeling* of life about the house.

I walked across the dry lawn to the lilac bush from whose shade Steve and I had "counted out" the doors, and turned for a last glance at the house. It had a curious, almost human, expression on its strong old face as it stood up there, stark and square, commanding the lane. It looked proud, as if conscious of containing treasures.

I remembered Steve's words, "There are things in that house that I should like to see." If I could have brought myself to open that door and walk in, or even if I had peered in at that slightly raised window — there was a hand now, drawing back the curtain — should I have found what he was so certain was there? Poor dear little Stevie, with his collector's faculty of apprehending Life from its relics! I should have found an old woman of singular vigor, and about her objects of greater antiquity — old almanacs, tear bottles from the tombs of kings, branches of coral, bits of rock aged as our old prairie. These I knew were there. But that secret thing that, to his last day, Steve with his intense, eager interest in all living so yearned to discover? Could it be that among all those ancient curios within those walls there was one with the magical power of giving long life?

If only Stevie could have got in! If only kind old Mrs. Heath had opened the door!

SUN WORSHIPPERS

By IRVING BRANT

I

The fragile stems of flowers in the shade,
Like lovely girls too suddenly grown tall,
Yearn upward till I come to be afraid
Beauty so slender can not live at all.
They were not born to meet the biting gale
Nor laugh with daisies at a summer sky;
The shadowed forest fashioned them so frail
They scarce could meet a moonbeam eye to eye.
Desiring joys they never can attain,
Their lives are moulded toward the flaming goal.
Sweet is the striving for it, sweet the pain
Of bravely rendering an Icarian toll.
They seek the light, yet wilt beneath the sun:
Is light an aspiration just begun?

II

Beside the granary, in a festal row,
The sunflowers sway with regimental motion
Of wind and worship, bending in devotion —
Bright-crowned devotion to a god dipped low.
Night purples, and the shut-eyed shadows flow,
Healing the wounded fields with misty lotion.
The white sails darken in an airy ocean:
No longer swing the poplars to and fro.
How still they are, and all their radiance fled,
Those day-long worshippers of a golden god!
Now, though the earth is but a dreaming clod
And hearts tumultuous say their lord is dead,
They stand like nuns along a colonnade,
With folded hands, devout and unafraid.

TWO POEMS

By ROBERT J. HARRIS

IMPROVISATION AT THE PIANOFORTE

Only the jack-pine's bitter comment,
Only the laughter of the grass,
Follow the bent man through the bushes,
Follow the mute wind through the pass:

Only the irony of laughter
Follows those leanly lifted hands,
Pausing over the song of thrushes,
Caught in a chord of surf and sands.

"GETTING DARK"

If I should make a bush of the tips of my fingers
And show you the shape that a bush should be
In the green little cave where the brown thrush lingers
When the grass is wet and the blind worms see;

You would be wise, but we'd still be strangers,
Unless, perhaps, you'd promise me
To follow on through the thicket's dangers
Down the throat of the dark, to the foot of the tree.

TO A GREAT ONE, AFTER DEATH

By HARMON C. WADE

I

Oh! they are doing all they ought to do —
Your Love, your Art, your Judgment and your Beauty;
They stand almost too loyally by you,
Too tranquilly subservient to duty.
I found your Love among the closing flowers,
And she was very, very kind to me;
Your Judgment is a fellow of calm powers;
Your Art is all you'd wish your art to be.

I met your Beauty on a rainy day.
We sat beneath a tree and thought together —
Until I felt that she was on the way
To kiss the face of your beloved weather.
These are no madcap, roguish runaways;
They stay at home, presiding o'er your praise.

II

The secret of Astrology
You caught in a song one time,
And the Hanging Gardens of Babylon
You swung within a rhyme.

Once, too, you found the goddess Demeter
Asleep by a garden wall,
And you tallied the lovely throb of her pulse
In a sonnet's rise and fall.

Demeter, Astrology, Babylon —
They come and wonder why,
Or finger over the songs of themselves
And sit all day and cry.

One thing, and one thing only,
Is plain for them to see —
That Life is never so kind to them
As Beauty used to be.

III

Set for the dawn, your Beauty bounds
The whole night long.
Behind her is a murk of hounds
And hunting song.

All through that hell of vale and wood,
Her hope burns clear;
Horizons in the dawn are good
To banish fear.

They skirt the sun; behind his back
They leap and sway.
And there, she turns against the pack,
Standing at bay.

Home with their shame, caught in the skies,
The hunters pass; —
But is it "Victory!" Beauty cries,
Or is it "Alas!"?

V

A great wave thunders on the shore,
To fill the hearts of all the shells
With murmuring song forevermore —
Soft monotone of old farewells.
The anger of a great wind swells
And walks forth in its pride to scatter
A hundred million lispings bells
Among the cottonwoods, and spatter
The poplars with a foam of chatter.

You are the wind, the globes of rain
That tumble with a solemn patter
Over the sides of the Great Wain.
You are the tremor in the grain,
The wide wave thundering on the shore; —
You are entangled in the skein
Of circumstance forevermore!

CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

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